Dialogical Teaching: Promoting Intellectual and Emotional Learning

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Abstract: Consistent with teachings of Paulo Freire, dialogical learning promotes understanding of the world within an empirical foundation. The teacher facilitates a learning experience that can blend feeling and knowing.

A class entitled "Torture Survivor Well-being" was developed as part of a clinical psychology trauma concentration. Clinical and community psychology perspectives were integrated to present an ecological model of understanding the impact of torture as a political tool.

Students were engaged personally and professionally to examine their own beliefs about the use of torture, examine global use, the effectiveness and consequences of torture, and learn empowerment approaches to client community education.

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"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."
James Baldwin, Author

Torture has been a plague among mankind since the beginning of recorded history. Its use as a tactical strategy not only breaks the individual, but impacts the victim's family and community. The exposure of torture as a tactic in the current war against terror only mirrors its use across centuries. It is a topic which sparks intense discussions about its effectiveness. It is a topic which is often shrouded in silence and denial.

Following the atrocities of the Holocaust, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Article 5 states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Making that commitment real requires the intellectual comprehension of how and why torture occurs, and an emotional response of abhorrence to torture and compassion for survivors. Such an effort began in earnest when Amnesty International (AI) launched a 1972 global campaign against torture which then provided the foundation for the development of a torture rehabilitation movement. One outcome of that global effort occurred December 10, 1984 when the United Nations adopted the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention focuses on condemning and preventing torture and holding perpetrators accountable. It also, however, requires that survivors be provided means to rehabilitation to the fullest extent possible.

There are currently 146 torture treatment programs in the world that provide specialized care and are affiliated through the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims. The mental health field, however, has lagged behind in preparing future providers to be able to identify and respond to the special needs of torture survivors. A recent analysis by Courtois and Gold (2009) identified the general lack of resources to address the psychological consequences of traumatic experiences. This is also reflected in the torture rehabilitation field where there are limited publications and specialized training. With these factors in mind, a class focused on torture survivor well-being was co-developed by the authors and was based on the work of Dr. Jessica Goodkind who worked with Hmong refugees in Michigan.

Dr. Goodkind developed a mental health intervention for Hmong refugee families, which involved training students to work with refugees utilizing community resources and to participate in learning circles that emphasized cultural exchanges between students and refugees. (Goodkind, 2006) Utilizing the Refugee Well-being model as a template, the authors adapted a two- semester course to involve graduate students in clinical psychology at the Adler School of Professional Psychology (Adler School) and in partnership with Heartland Alliance Marjorie Kovler Center (Kovler Center). Nancy Bothne is Director of Community Engagement at the Adler School and Mary Fabri is the Senior Director of Torture Treatment Services and International Training at the Kovler Center. The focus of the Torture Survivor Well-being class is community-based advocacy interventions.

In the conceptualization of the class it is noted that torture is a human perpetrated form of abuse and occurs in the context of a relationship. Victims often feel as if they are no longer the person they were before being tortured, that torture has altered their personalities. A common

goal of torture is to isolate individuals from their communities. The loss of connection to one's previous self and to one's community is profound and can be exacerbated by physical displacement when victims are displaced or resettled in another country. Nothing is familiar and misperceptions about expectations and available forms of assistance are commonplace.

Individual psychotherapy is not a common treatment approach in non-Western societies. Survivors are often from cultures where community is a resource; counsel and comfort are provided by elders and religious leaders. The Torture Survivor Well-being class includes a communal experience with which many survivors may be more familiar. The course is designed in a two-semester sequence. The first semester provides the foundation of understanding and skills needed for work with torture survivors; the second semester included experiential learning through cultural exchanges with survivors.

This dialogical teaching method employed by the instructors aimed to benefit both survivors and students. It is based on a mutual learning model and influenced by the writings of Paulo Freire. Certain social issues are best examined through dialogical teaching that promotes learning and a deep sense of knowing by the student. Consistent with the teachings of Paulo Freire, dialogical learning allows students to match their understanding of the world with an empirical foundation. The teacher thus facilitates a learning experience that can blend feeling and knowing.

The learning objectives of this first semester of the Torture Survivor Well-being class include: understanding the consequences and manifestations of torture; understanding and utilizing an ecological analysis of harm and well-being; learning to engage in self care and avoid vicarious traumatization; developing an analytic understanding of how social systems in the U.S.

impact torture survivors' well-being; developing skills that promote empowerment and problem-solving in a community setting. The format of the first semester is weekly classroom sessions with assigned readings, lectures, presentations, and discussions. The first week introduces students to the issue of torture within the context of its legal definition. It is made clear that the acts perpetrated are common across the spectrum of violence and that the context of the acts determines the differences between officially sanctioned torture and other acts of violence. Common to most definitions of torture are the elements of intentionality, a power-defenseless relationship, infliction of pain or suffering, and being committed in an official capacity.

Weeks two and three present an ecological model for understanding the impact of torture on the individual, family, community, the larger society, and ultimately, the global community. Week four provides an opportunity to look at the phenomenon of vicarious traumatization and explore the possible impact working with severe trauma survivors has on the helper, also a part of the micro-ecological understanding. Readings and discussion on the refugee and asylum conditions in the United States and Great Britain provided information about the challenges confronting refugees, but also an examination of a macro-ecological component. Guest speakers were taken advantage of during weeks six and seven with two international visitors. A clinical psychologist from Rwanda spoke about his experiences working in the country following the 1994 genocide and a Black South African spoke about his family's experiences with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and of life in a post-apartheid society.

Week eight places the class at the half-way point and a shift takes place to skill development. Using the writings of Paolo Friere's (1970) "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" as a launching point, students are encouraged to challenge their own belief systems of how to be

helpful. Students also receive an assignment to research countries identified as the possible homelands of learning circle participants in the second semester, learning about the geographical, political, and social-cultural conditions of the country for a class presentation. The remaining readings and class discussions explore strength-based and problem focused solutions, again within an ecological model of understanding the interaction between the individual, family, community, and larger society. By the end of the first semester, students were prepared with the intellectual theory and foundation needed to facilitate their interactions with survivors.

Experiential Learning: Students with Survivors

The second semester of the class allowed students to emotionally experience what we learned about in the first semester: the devastating ecological impact of torture affecting individuals, families, and communities; the risks survivors take by reestablishing emotional connections with others; the power imbalance that may exist between a privileged white middle class student and a displaced survivor who finds herself in a minority status in the United States.

These lessons were learned through the informal cultural exchanges that occurred through weekly interactions between students and survivors, and the more intimate meetings that took place between a paired student and survivor. The plan for the class was that students would spend time approximately 4 to 6 hours weekly with their "assigned" survivor outside of class. Although the class did not proceed as planned (as noted in the "challenges" section below,) students and survivors both reported they felt that the experience was successful. The learning circles were loosely structured. We would spend the first hour discussing a theme with each other. We would often continue our discussion of the theme during lunch, which was provided for all participants. We also engaged in conversation about the food itself, as it was often from an ethnic restaurant. Students and survivors alike were unfamiliar with the textures and spices;

we were able to share together our reactions to the unfamiliar. After lunch, the survivors would leave and the students and faculty processed the emotional and intellectual interactions within the group.

The themes for the cultural exchanges were selected by the group members. Topics ranged from how our countries celebrated different kinds of holidays, to what countries we would like to travel to and why. Students, faculty and survivors shared their hopes and dreams through some of these exchanges. We also shared the common emotions that are inherent in our role as women in our respective cultures, the relationships between mothers and their children, or how we had celebrated (or not) significant birthdays.

The breadth of our exchanges was reflective of the breadth of the experiences of students and survivors alike. We each had a cultural identity to share, shaped by our country's culture, but also by the values of the family in which we were raised. All of us were women, which offered a foundation of safety as we were free to discuss the commonality of women's lesser status in the culture and country in which each of us lived.

The intent of the class was to pair each survivor with a student. The student would then work with the survivor to develop a plan that empowers the survivor to take action for his or her own well-being. The plan may have as a goal that the survivor be able to identify and interact with service providers necessary to fill a particular need (e.g., visiting a dentist, understanding how to access medical care at the public hospital, or how to find an immigration attorney and proceed through the asylum process). This did not work out as planned, for a number of reasons, which are explained below.

Evaluation of the Experience

The goals of this class were to help the clinical psychology students understand torture and how to conceptualize beyond an individual intervention model. Through this class, we wanted students to gain experience interfacing with systems that affect survivors' well-being. The community-based interventions were informed by the survivors' needs and concerns about immigration status, identifying options for elementary schools, and finding cultural events and fun activities in an unfamiliar city. Students were also encouraged to develop self care strategies that would help them cope with the witnessing aspect of working with survivors of torture and other trauma.

Evaluations of the class were conducted with students and survivors. The students reported that they did understand torture and its impact at the individual and community level. One student commented, "This opened my eyes and mind and heart to the reality and the prevalence of torture." Although students were not able to participate in community level actions as planned, the appreciation for the importance of community based interventions was identified. As one student reflected on what she learned about working with torture survivors, she said, "The systems from an ecological aspect are so important." All of the students remarked about their newly acquired understanding (and dismay) of U.S. immigration law.

Students also appreciated the spirit of self care that was encouraged throughout the class, both through the class culture and encouragement of individual strategies. The students consistently reported in their evaluations that they felt able to make mistakes and learn from them. One student remarked how "I … learned so much and was able to think about the issues that we discussed and ask questions in an environment that felt safe".

Survivors, too, were asked to evaluate the class, and they also expressed appreciation for the safe environment. Through the cultural exchanges, they were able to share of themselves and

come to trust others. The cultural exchanges and personal relationships facilitated survivors' understanding of U.S. culture and how to relate to the everyday lives of U.S. women. This kind of growth helps facilitate survivors' healing. This was evident when, over the course of the class, one survivor moved from keeping her head down on the table, avoiding eye contact into a bright, vivacious leader in the cultural exchanges.

Challenges

There were some significant challenges to facilitating the experiences of students and survivors alike. The first semester of the class, intended to prepare students with the theory and foundation from which to begin their experiences, was held from 6 to 9 pm at night. The students talked about leaving the class feeling emotionally vulnerable to the contemplation of torture and with little opportunity to process their thoughts.

The weather posed significant challenges to the cultural exchanges. The learning circles took place from January through April during one of the coldest and snowiest of Chicago's winters. Several learning circles were cancelled, some at the last minute, because of the obstacle of weather conditions.

Developing the out-of-class partnerships was also challenging. Once winter established itself in earnest, not a single learning circle was attended by all survivors at the same time. This coincided with the need to assign partnerships, challenging the ability to "test" in the circle whether the match would work. Another challenge was the instability in the lives of the survivors. One participant was facing overwhelming housing issues and left the circle as well as Chicago.

Another challenge throughout the learning circles required a balance of survivors' best interests with what the students needed to learn. The survivors always came first. This meant that the kind of direct feedback students needed was sometimes postponed. One example occurred within a student made a joke about torture. In a classroom, this would have resulted in an immediate response. Within the learning circle, however, we had to more subtly indicate to the student the impropriety and discuss it with her later in more detail.

The relationships of students, survivors and faculty are an important component to the experiences of all those participating in the class. The two teaching faculty had to develop and model trust and respect for each other, thus contributing to the class and group environment that included the students and survivors. The students experienced that trust, saying that "The professors helped create an atmosphere where we felt comfortable being wrong and asking questions and learning from our mistakes." The survivors, too, remarked that through this experience they, too, learned that they could trust in others.

Summary

Consistent with the teachings of Paulo Freire, dialogical learning allows students to match their emotional understanding of the world with an empirical foundation. The Torture Survivor Well-being class provided students with the opportunity to experience the emotions that emerge from understanding torture and its consequences, learn from those who have survived torture about recovery, and explore their internal values in regards to the necessity of condemning torture. The lessons learned in the theory and foundation focused first semester provided a reservoir for students to draw from in negotiating their relationships with the survivors in the learning circles. In this class, both survivors and students benefitted.

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